

IN REVIEW

PHILADELPHIA — *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Center City
Opera Theater, 6/6/07

Center City Opera Theater, an ambitious local professional enterprise presided over by conductor Andrew M. Kurtz, ended its eighth season on June 6 with a genuine event — the world premiere of a CCOT-commissioned chamber version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, by one of America's most accomplished neo-Romantic composers, Lowell Liebermann. Unveiled in Monte Carlo in 1996, this worthwhile opera — based on Oscar Wilde's remarkable metaphorical fable of a short novel — reached North America three years later at Milwaukee's Florentine Opera. Never difficult to listen to — although one hears reminders of Korngold, Bartók, Barber and Glass, the piece does not register as derivative, like the musically third-hand *Margaret Garner* — *Dorian Gray* sometimes sounded difficult to play, especially for the brass, despite Kurtz's stylish leadership of his committed forces. (Solo cellist Glenn Fischbach deserves special marks.) The still quite lush orchestration in this new reduction sometimes overpowered the singers in the intimate Perelman Theater, rendering the text hard to comprehend in places: this was a shame, as Liebermann sets speech rhythms quite effectively.

Though Leland Kimball's staging was fluid and sensible, the lack of an enclosed-back set hindered the singers' projection. Bradley Helm was credited with "scenic concept," providing six aptly Doric columns and some scene-establishing props aided by a Power Point screen on which period photos, thematically apposite pre-Raphaelite paintings, some Turner seascapes and progressively more grotesque versions of Dorian's soul-reflecting portrait appeared. (The final variants proved too cartoonish: Dorian's image evoked rocker David Lee Roth in a gray fright wig).

Well costumed by Amy Chmielewski, the cast performed strongly; Lieberman's idiom perhaps too frequently demands responsive upper registers. Jorge Garza, his lyric tenor always musical, gave a deft, thorough performance but presented the same problem as Hurd Hatfield's Dorian in Albert Lewin's 1945 MGM film — a pleasant-looking, not-quite-young-enough fellow in a part demanding a knockout. (One can bewail the lemming-rush toward "looks casting" in opera and still acknowledge that Dorian — like Billy Budd or Lulu — needs beauty that is an entity unto itself for the plot to make sense.)

Bass Matthew Curran (as Basil, the portrait's creator) sang very creditably yet needed to animate his words more. Jody Sheinbaum's bright soprano and engaging presence won sympathy in Sibyl's difficult music. Best of all, Raymond Ayers (the aphoristic Lord Henry) showed a high-quality baritone with flexibility of dynamics and color, plus a real gift for meaningful textual delivery. He and Garza did emotional and vocal justice to what amounts to a highly Romantic Straussian duet for Henry and Dorian before the rather Grand Guignol tragic finale.

The other stalwart performers included baritone Joseph Specter (as Sibyl's vindictive brother), lively soprano Jennifer Harris (as a penetrating-voiced Whore), tenor Olindo Marseglia (as an amusing cameo as a callous aristocrat) and solid-voiced bass-baritone Jeffrey Chapman (as two servants). In this version, Liebermann's opera provides a satisfying evening of music theater that other companies — taking some acoustical precautions — might well wish to program. □

DAVID SHENGOLD

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